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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000849

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/09/2027

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN OPPONENTS TALKING BIG BEFORE  
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

REF: A. ANKARA 773

[1](#)B. ANKARA 588

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b  
, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: In the final days before Turkey's presidential election process officially begins on April 16 (ref A), Prime Minister Erdogan's opponents are waging a last gasp effort to prevent his candidacy. Secularists' attempts to stir the public to action against the perceived Islamist threat have so far largely fizzled, though opposition rallies are scheduled for April 14. Public displays are unlikely to influence the election process at this stage, but Erdogan's opponents may hope that an eleventh-hour show will deter Erdogan by hinting at the battles he would face as president.  
END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

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Sticks and Stones  
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[1](#)2. (C) Both support for and objections to Erdogan's candidacy are typically couched in coded references to "democratic process" -- by which some mean, "The PM's party has a legal right to choose and elect a candidate," while others mean, "Erdogan and his cronies cannot live up to the constitutionally-required presidential qualities, particularly secularism and national solidarity." Secularists indirectly warn against the dangers of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) by publicly emphasizing secularism, education, consensus, and national unity and integrity. More directly, Republican People's Party (CHP) chairman Deniz Baykal in mid-March called on the military to not remain "indifferent" should Erdogan declare his candidacy. While nearly all observers agree the conditions that paved the way for past coups do not exist, opposition politicians and the media keep the spectre present by referring publicly to "coups" or to the "silence" of the military. CHP deputy chairman Haluk Koc stated that someone whose political past (referring to Erdogan's 1998 imprisonment for inciting religious enmity when he recited a poem) proves his lack of faith in the Turkish Republic cannot hold the honorable post of president. He compares the AKP's unwillingness to find a consensus candidate equivalent to a "civilian coup."

13. (C) Koc's call for consensus in the election process was echoed in an April 5 statement by the Rectors' Committee at the High Education Council (YOK). The rectors called for an impartial president who fully absorbs the basic principles of the Republic, particularly secularism and modern science, as spelled out in the constitution. Making an unusual "policy" statement, YOK president Erdogan Tezic joined those arguing that the constitution requires a quorum of 367 MPs to convene the first round of presidential election voting. (The CHP has renewed its claim that should AKP fail to convene 367 MPs for the first round, it will appeal to the Constitutional Court to invalidate the voting (Ref B)). Tezic denied that this was a political argument, claiming, "Universities are obliged to enlighten the public."

14. (C) With the rectors' statement still resonating, Supreme Court chief prosecutor Nuri Ok chimed in this week with a reminder that the presidential election would be a test of democracy. He implied that the voting process, this time propelled by AKP's numerical majority, is only part of that test. He said that the president must be someone who has internalized the presidential oath, which includes safeguarding the principles of the secular Republic and preserving and exalting Turkey's glory and honor. Replacing Ok, whose term is coming to a close, will be one of the new president's first tasks.

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Demonstrations Act as Democratic Pressure Valves  
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15. (C) Last minute efforts to rally the public against Erdogan and AKP may translate into little actual impact. The

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Democratic Left Party (DSP) was able to muster approximately 40,000 people from all over Turkey to its April 8 demonstration in Ankara. But the media coverage focused more on the party favors -- orange balloons with a caricature of Prime Minister Erdogan that participants could pop with pins or deflate -- than on the speeches or messages of an alternative way.

16. (C) The rally to watch, however, is April 14, organized by the Ataturkist Thought Association. TNP contacts expect attendance to reach 150,000 (still well below the organizers' hoped-for one million). The rally, at which only Turkish flags will be permitted -- no slogans or posters -- is planned to end at Ataturk's mausoleum in Ankara. Press reports indicate some 20 universities are supporting the event, including in some cases deans and rectors. The president of the Veterans' Association, retired Gen. Riza Kucukoglu, has asked his members to participate, as has the CHP Ankara Provincial office. Hurriyet columnist Emin Colasan has encouraged readers to make good use of "this last opportunity."

17. (C) By contrast, the Human Rights Association Istanbul branch is discouraging participation, claiming the rally is an effort of "status quo forces" who resist democratization. The Ataturkist Thought Association has been traditionally perceived to be a bastion of secular, Kemalist values. Now led by retired Jandarma commander Gen. Sener Eryugur, who heads a branch of the leftist-nationalist National Unity Movement Platform (reportedly established by convicted assailant of former Human Rights Association president Akin Birdal, Semih Tufan Gunaltay) and is under investigation for an alleged 2004 coup plot, the Association has acquired an edge that makes some mainstream secularists wary.

18. (C) At this stage, any rally has the potential to lead to unrest; the volatile mix of large crowds, leftist nationalism, frustrated youth, and last-minute desperation may increase this risk (ref B). If such incidents occur, they are not likely to trigger a cascade of violence. The opposition's ham-fisted attempts to incite the public to

action against Erdogan and AKP have largely fizzled thus far, with no new plan of attack on the horizon. And AKP has one advantage no other party has: the numbers in parliament to elect the next president.

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